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**LESSONS FROM NINETEENTH CENTURY EUROPE ON MANAGING THE
EMERGENCE OF A GREAT POWER**

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LESSONS FROM NINETEENTH CENTURY EUROPE ON MANAGING THE EMERGENCE OF A GREAT POWER

INTRODUCTION

In a dynamic and anarchic international system, the United States, now near the height of its global preeminence, must address a shifting equilibrium in the distribution of power and how best to accommodate a rising great power. As demonstrated by breakdown of the European system in World War I, the stakes are very high. The European failure to successfully deal with the rise of Germany offers some suggestions as how the United States should deal with a new emerging great power in the years ahead.

AMERICAN PREEMINENCE AND THE INEVITABILITY OF CHANGE

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in 1989-91 brought an end to the post-World War II bipolar equilibrium and gave way, in its immediate aftermath, to a resurgence in U.S. power and influence, marked by American economic dynamism, impressive American (or American-led) military victories in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans, and the expansion of American cultural/commercial dominance. It is an historical high point dubbed “The Unipolar Moment” by conservative pundit Charles Krauthammer in a 1990 *Foreign Affairs* article. Other analysts hesitate to characterize contemporary international politics as unipolar or the United States as a hegemon. Henry Kissinger prefers to describe the American role as “preeminent:”

... the United States is sufficiently able to insist on its view and to carry the day often enough to evoke charges of American hegemony. At the same time, American prescriptions for the rest of the world often reflect either domestic pressures or a reiteration of maxims drawn from the experience of the Cold War. The result is that the country’s

preeminence is coupled with the serious potential of becoming irrelevant to many of the currents affecting and ultimately transforming the global order.¹

Whether – or, more appropriately how long – this American preeminence will last is unknown. Realists would argue that, in a competitive world, based upon, in Hobbes' phrase, a war of "all against all," U.S. primacy most likely reflects a relatively short-term and inherently unstable international situation – a passing historical interlude before the international system eventually evolves into something more intrinsically stable. Given the dynamic of human history and experience and the "anarchy" of international politics, this seems a likely possibility.²

The struggle, at its heart, as Hobbes implies, is intrinsic to international politics: a free-for-all by which competing states seek to be able to "deliver the goods" to their constituencies. Implicit in this dynamic is the threat or possibility of large-scale violence and conflict. Hans Morgenthau, one of the fathers of twentieth century "realism," argues in his classic, *Politics Among Nations*:

International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim. Statesmen and people may ultimately seek freedom, security, prosperity, or power itself. They may define their goals in terms of religious, philosophic, economic or social ideal. They may hope that this ideal will materialize through its own inner force, through divine intervention, or through the

¹ Kissinger. *Does America need a Foreign Policy*. Simon and Schuster. New York. 2001. P. 18

² See Waltz, Stephen M "International Relations: One World, Many Theories." *Foreign Policy*. Spring 1998. p. 29: "Conflict is common among states because the international system creates powerful incentives for aggression. The root cause of the problem is the anarchic nature of the international system. In anarchy there is no higher body or sovereign that protects states from one another. Hence each state living under anarchy faces the ever-present possibility that another state will use force to harm or conquer it. Offensive military action is always a threat to all states in the system" In *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Paul Kennedy argues that this chronic instability is not merely a quest for power, but a reflection of underlying economic verities: "The relative strengths of the leading nations in world affairs never remain constant, principally because of the uneven rate of growth among different societies and of the technological and organizational breakthroughs which bring a greater advantage to one society than to another." See Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. Random House. New York. 1987. pp. xx-xxi.

natural development of human affairs. They may also try to further its realization through nonpolitical means, such as technical co-operation with other nations of international organizations. But whenever they strive to realize their goal by means of international politics, they do so by striving for power.³

Later in his book, Morgenthau carries his argument further:

The aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or overthrow the status quo, leads of necessity to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it. We say “of necessity” advisedly. For here again we are confronted with the basic misconception that has impeded the understandings of international politics and made us the prey of illusions. *This misconception asserts that men have a choice between power politics and its necessary outgrowth, the balance of power, on one hand, and a different, better kind of international relations on the other.* It insists that a foreign policy based on the balance of power is one among several foreign policies and that only stupid and evil men will choose the former and reject the latter. [Italics mine]

...the balance of power [e.g., equilibrium in an international system] and policies aiming at its preservation are not only inevitable but are an essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations; and that the instability of the international balance of power is due not to the faultiness of the principle but to the particular conditions under which the principle must operate in a society of sovereign nations.⁴

Morgenthau grimly observes, “All history shows that nations active in international politics are continuously preparing for, actively involved in, or recovering from organized violence in the form of war.”⁵

Thus, despite the current preeminent international role played by the United States, the ever-shifting, anarchic, dynamic and *chaotic* world will produce a shift in the relative power

³Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Borzoi/Alfred A. Knopf. New York. 1978.p. 29

⁴ Ibid. pp. 173-4.

⁵ Ibid. p. 43. Also see Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press. New York. 1981. p. 10. In this work, Gilpin presents a framework for understanding change in international politics, that argues that the international system seeks equilibrium.

relationships among states in the international system at some future point; a shift resulting from a conscious struggle by sovereign states to gain the advantage in order to serve national goals: getting what you want and keeping what you have. The speed, magnitude, and occurrence of such shifts have often been unexpected in the past – the shifts themselves being the product of a dynamic, disorderly, and – at their heart – *fundamentally human* (and inherently unpredictable with regard to their particulars) processes. France did not anticipate its sudden defeat by Prussia in 1870 or by Nazi Germany in 1940. The miscalculations of virtually all of the great powers of Europe in 1914 are well documented – as are the subsequent impact of World War I on European history and the European world role. Surprise and the limits of human imagination and analysis preclude policy-makers or societies from fully anticipating the nature, timing, size, and speed of such shifts in international politics. However, we *do know* that America's moment, as Krauthammer concedes, is just that, a moment. (A Krauthammer column that previewed the Foreign Affairs piece was subtitled: “Enjoy it now, it won’t last long.”⁶) Huntington flatly states, “In the unipolar moment at the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was often able to impose its will on other nations. That moment has now passed.”⁷

In his superb study, *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger cautions:

International systems live precariously. Every “world order” expresses an aspiration to permanence; the very term has a ring of eternity about it. Yet the elements which comprise it are in *constant flux*. [Italics mine.]⁸

⁶ Krauthammer, Charles. “The Unipolar Moment; Enjoy It Now. It Won’t Last.” *Washington Post* (July 20, 1990): p A19. The longer piece is: Krauthammer, Charles. “The Unipolar Moment.” *Foreign Affairs*. Volume 70, issue 1 (Winter 1990/1991). pp. 23-34.

⁷ Huntington. p. 43.

⁸ Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster. New York. 1994. p. 806.

Kissinger goes on to note the inherent danger in times of transition, from one international system to another, “Whenever the entities constituting the international system change their character, a period of turmoil inevitably follows.”⁹

Arguably, we now face a period, of unknown length, possibly tumultuous and violent, of transition to a more stable and (possibly) enduring world order. Writing of George W. Bush’s proclamation of a new world order, Kissinger writes, “... it is still in a period of gestation, and its final form will not be visible until well into the next [i.e., twenty-first] century.”¹⁰ American influence is now at its high water mark, or slightly past it; the eventual ebb tide is inevitable.

Given the certainty of change in the current international system – change that will be reflected in the relative decline of American power – American strategists must consider how best to maintain the current American advantage (a broad policy aim that would subsume all others from the realist’s perspective, paralleling the objective of “keeping what you have and getting what you want”¹¹) while, at the same time, managing this transition to a more enduring (but nonetheless impermanent) international system. Of this adjustment, Kissinger notes:

Americans should not view this as a humbling of America or a symptom of national decline. For most of its history, the United States was in fact a nation among others, not a preponderate superpower. The rise of other power centers – in Western Europe, Japan, and China – should not alarm Americans.¹²

⁹ Ibid. p. 806.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 806.

¹¹ Morgenthau phrases it more bluntly in his *Politics Among Nations*: “All politics, *domestic and international*, reveals three basic patterns; that is, all political phenomena can be reduced to one of three basic types. *A political policy seeks to either to keep power, to increase power, or to demonstrate power.*” [italics mine] p. 42

¹² Kissinger. *Diplomacy*. p. 810.

The relative American decline in influence¹³ may be in the near future; it may, more likely, be in the more distant years to come. The United States needs to think through the implications of the potential rise of a peer competitor (or competitors), another great power that may – at least in regional setting – may be able to challenge the U.S. on a more or less equal footing. This is a fundamental challenge for American diplomacy in the years ahead.

Kissinger cites three possibilities of other future power centers: Europe, Japan, and China. China is often cited as the most likely candidate to mount such a challenge, often in the American popular press and among conservative political circles.¹⁴ Fears – of China's large population, expanding economy, strong cultural identity, xenophobic sense of history, and unclear ambitions as a great power are among the reasons why it is perceived to be a potential rival to American influence. Moreover, unlike Western Europe and Japan, the Chinese-American relationship has been marked, not by alliance (NATO and the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty), but more often by mistrust, suspicion, and even, at times, confrontation.¹⁵ American relationships with European and Japanese allies, although sometimes fractious on trade and economic issues, are much closer and, with democratic systems well established in

¹³ Kissinger is speaking to a relative increase in the power of other states, as contrasted with an *absolute* decline in American power. However he describes this development it reflects a *relative* decline in American influence vis a vis other states. Of course, this relative decline need *not* mean an immediate or even near-term end to American “preeminence.” That argument is the point of this paper.

¹⁴ See, for instance: Gertz, Bill. *The China Threat: How the Peoples Republic Targets America*. Regnery Publishing. New York. 2000. Also see: Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Co. New York. 2001.

¹⁵ I do not want to overstate this point, but the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis, the Chinese reaction to the accidental American bombing of the Belgrade Embassy in 1998, and the incident involving the American EP-3 in March 2001 can be cited to support this observation.

both Europe and Japan, far more transparent.¹⁶ In short, while there is nothing guaranteed about a Chinese bid for global or even regional hegemony, China serves as a useful point of departure for how the United States should approach a strategy of accommodating a rising power.

In considering such probable upcoming changes to the international system, we are well served by examining other such transitions. The nineteenth century European experience ended in the First World War, a seminal event – and that war set off nearly a century of events that included World War II and the Cold War, events collectively described as a European civil war. With the end of the Cold War, that historic struggle has ended, with the victory of liberal democracy in Europe.¹⁷

The international system in place (at least in Europe) prior to the twentieth century, the Concert of Europe and the subsequent continental balance of power, while not *precisely* analogous to the contemporary system or to the one which is likely to emerge, nonetheless serves as the most recent example of a stable international system prior to the Cold War bipolarity. This system, of nineteenth century Europe, was undermined by its inability to accommodate the rise of an ascendant Germany. In this key respect – accommodating the rise of a great power – the challenges that the United States will face in the years to come are perhaps similar to those faced by European statesmanship from the mid- and late-1800's through 1914. Moreover, the

¹⁶ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye echo Paul Kennedy and underscore the inevitability of the change facing the United States, while providing an argument for considering the potentially unique Chinese role: “Ironically, the benefits of a hegemonic system [like that of the post-Cold War world], and the extent to which they are shared, may bring about its collapse. As their economic power increases, secondary states change their assumptions. No longer do they have to accept a one-sided dependence which, no matter how prosperous, adversely affects governmental autonomy and political status. As autonomy and status become possible, these values are taken from the closet of “desirable but unrealizable goals.” At least for some leaders and some countries... prosperity is no longer enough.” See Keohane, Robert O. and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. *Power and Interdependence*. Longman. New York. 1989. p. 45.

¹⁷ A victory that Francis Fukuyama chose to characterize as: “The End of History.” Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*. Volume 16 (Summer 1989). pp. 3-18. Fukuyama later expanded on the article into a full-length book.

war(s) which brought about the collapse of the nineteenth century European system and the events leading up to World War I serve as object lessons for policymakers on the risks involved with the failure to properly manage the international system and the dynamic great power relationships that are at the heart of that system. The cost, risk, and uncertainty of war with another great power, particularly in a nuclear age, are such that American decision makers must be absolutely certain that their actions and policies have protected vital national interests while minimizing the chance of such a potentially catastrophic conflict.

In looking at the European experience, I will attempt to draw lessons, and suggest a broad roadmap, for ways in which the United States should address the emergence of new great power challengers, with a particular focus on China. This examination of European history in the nineteenth century will, of necessity, be brief and superficial. Nonetheless, capturing some of the major events and trends of that era will help in suggesting the broad parameters of a U.S. strategic approach. A cautionary note from Henry Kissinger is well worth considering before proceeding down this path:

In a mood of fatalism, the emergence of China is often compared to that of Germany in the nineteenth century, which ultimately led to World War I. But there is nothing foreordained about that war. History has recorded it above all as a failure of statesmanship, a blunder that produced costs out of proportion to any conceivable gains for all the parties. Which of the statesman who went to war in 1914 would not have jumped at the chance to revisit their decision when they looked back a few years later and saw the catastrophe they had inflicted on their societies, on European civilization, and on the long-term prospects of the entire world?

Of course, the choice is not entirely up to the United States. Faced with a threat of hegemony in Asia – whatever the regime – America would resist it But insofar as the choice depends on American action, it should be made with great care.¹⁸ .

¹⁸ Ibid. p 136-7. Kissinger is (again) speaking of the future possibility of a Chinese challenge. Needless to say, *current* American influence and ability to project power in the region far surpasses that of the Chinese.

THE RISE OF GERMANY AND THE COLLAPSE OF EUROPEAN STABILITY

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., offers the following summary of the history of Europe's great powers from 1815 to 1914:

... the nineteenth-century balance of power system divides into five periods. At the Congress of Vienna, the states of Europe brought France back into the fold and agreed on certain rules of the game to equalize the players. From 1815 to 1822, these rules formed the "Concert of Europe." The states concerted their actions, meeting frequently to deal with disputes and to maintain an equilibrium. They accepted certain interventions to keep governments in power domestically when their replacements might lead to destabilizing reorientation of policy. This became more difficult with the rise of nationalism and democratic revolutions, but a truncated concert persisted from 1822 to 1854. This concert fell apart in mid-century when the revolutions of liberal nationalism challenged the practices of proving territorial compensation or restoring governments to maintain equilibrium. Nationalism became too strong to allow such an easy cutting up of cheeses.

The third period in the process, from 1854 to 1870, was far less moderate and was marked by five wars. One, the Crimean War, was a classic balance of power war in which France and Britain prevented Russia from pressing the declining Ottoman Empire. The others, however, were related to the unification of Italy and Germany. Political leaders dropped the old rules and began to use nationalism for their expedient purposes. Bismarck, for example, was not an ideological German nationalist. He was a deeply conservative man who wanted Germany united under the Prussian monarchy. But he was quite prepared to use nationalist appeals and wars to defeat Denmark, Austria, and France in bringing this about. Once he had accomplished his goals, he returned to a more conservative role.

The fourth period, 1870 to 1890, was the Bismarckian balance of power in which the new Prussian-led Germany played the key role. Bismarck played flexibly with a variety of alliance partners and tried to divert France overseas into imperialistic adventures and away from its lost province of Alsace and Lorraine. He limited German imperialism in order to keep the balancing act in Europe centered on Berlin. Bismarck's successors, however, were not as agile. From 1890 to 1914, there was a balance of power, but flexibility was gradually lost. Bismarck's successors did not renew his treaty with Russia; Germany had become involved in overseas imperialism, challenged Britain's naval supremacy, and did not discourage Austrian confrontations with Russia over the Balkans. These policies exacerbated the fears of rising German power, polarized the system, and led to World War I.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 57-58. Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Understanding International Conflict*. Longman. New York. 1997. pp. 57-71.

Mid-century and beyond, however, the unification of Germany and its emergence as a great power become the central issue for European stability. Germany became the dominant continental power in 1870, after Prussia defeated France (Prussia having previously defeated Austria, its rival for German primacy, in 1866). For the twenty years following Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian war, a statesman of extraordinary talent, Otto von Bismarck, led Germany. Bismarck headed the Prussian government since 1862 and was the architect of German unification – achieved through three wars in less than a decade. Part of Bismarck's genius lay *in understanding the limits of German power*. Bismarck is “one of the rare leaders of mighty states who chose to limit his ambitions” even though “Bismarck's Germany was undefeated and uniquely formidable when he chose to pursue peace in place of expansion.”²⁰ Bismarck understood Germany's weak geo-strategic position (fearing a two front war):

To be sure, the new German Empire [after 1870] was not without disadvantages. From the beginning it faced the hostility of a France that was still wealthy and strong but bitterly resentful at its defeat, and where many Frenchmen burned for vengeance, eager to recover their lost provinces. The annexation of Alsace-Lorraine also added to the considerable number of non-German subjects who were imperfectly and, to some degree, unwillingly incorporated into the empire. Germany's greatest disadvantage came from its geography. Unprotected by the seas, like the islands of Great Britain, or by vast spaces, like Russia, Germany sat in the center of Europe surrounded by potential enemies, especially between a hostile France and a powerful Russia, with no defensible borders to the east and none to protect its new conquests in the west.²¹

²⁰ Kagan, Donald. *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. Doubleday. New York. 1996. p. 101.

²¹ Ibid. p. 84. Also see Lowe, John. *The Great Powers, Imperialism and the German Problem, 1865-1925*. Routledge. New York. 1994. p.1: “After 1870 Germany was the most powerful state on the continent, following the defeat of both Austria and France.” Also: Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Co. New York. 2001. pp. 183-4: “What accounts for this … rather peaceful behavior by Germany. Why did Bismarck, who was so inclined toward offense during his first nine years in office, become more defense-oriented in his last nineteen years? It was not because Bismarck had a sudden epiphany and became ‘a peace loving diplomatic genius.’ In fact, it was because he and his [immediate] successors correctly understood that the Germany

In pursuing German unification under Prussian leadership, Bismarck's genius was assisted by, and stood in contrast to, the incompetence of other continental European leaders, notably Napoleon III of France:

Napoleon brought about the reverse of what he set out to accomplish. Fancying himself the destroyer of the Vienna settlement and the inspiration of European nationalism, he threw European diplomacy into a state of turmoil from which France gained nothing in the long run and other nations benefited. Napoleon made possible the unification of Italy and unintentionally abetted the unification of Germany, two events which weakened France geopolitically and destroyed the historical basis for the dominant French influence in Central Europe. Thwarting either would have been beyond France's capabilities, yet Napoleon's erratic policy did much to accelerate the process while simultaneously dissipating France's capacity to shape the new international order according to its long-term interests. Napoleon tried to wreck the Vienna system because he thought it isolated France – which to some extent was true – yet by the time his rule had ended in 1870, France was more isolated than it had been during the Metternich period.

Bismarck's legacy was quite the opposite. Few statesmen have so altered the course of history. Before Bismarck took office, German unity was expected to occur through the kind of parliamentary, constitutional government which had been the thrust of the Revolution of 1848. Five years later, Bismarck was well on his way to solving the problem of German unification, which had confounded three generations of Germans, but he did so on the basis of the preeminence of Prussian power, not through a process of democratic constitutionalism. Bismarck's solution had never been advocated by any significant constituency. Too democratic for conservatives, too authoritarian for liberals, too power-oriented for legitimatists, the new Germany was tailored to a genius who proposed to direct the forces he had unleashed, both foreign and domestic, by manipulating their antagonisms – a task he mastered but which proved beyond the capacity of his successors.²²

Following his dismissal in 1890, German decision making eventually was dominated by far less gifted leaders who did not fully understand Germany's position on the continent and who did not fully appreciate the need to maintain diplomatic and alliance flexibility. The

army had conquered about as much territory as it could without provoking a great-power war, which Germany was likely to lose.”

²² Kissinger. *Diplomacy*. pp 104-5

incompetence and malevolence of the German leadership paralleled Britain's increasing perception of a German threat, especially to Britain's overseas empire and foreign commerce, and of isolation, resulting from growing German power and assertiveness. "The basic aims of British foreign policy were then twofold: the protection of the country's overseas trade and possessions and resistance to domination of the continent by any one state."²³ Germany – and Europe – missed Bismarck's genius:

... the hallmarks of Bismarck's system were its flexibility and its complexity. The former made the resulting balance of power system stable because it allowed for occasional crises or conflicts without causing the whole edifice to crumble. Germany was at the center of the system, and Bismarck can be likened to an expert juggler who keeps several balls in the

²³ Lowe. p. 4. There were two specific dimensions of Germany's emergence as the major power on the continent that were particularly threatening to Britain in two specific aspects: German militarism, especially German naval ambition, and German economic expansion. The importance of British naval pre-eminence is explained by Lowe on p. 5: "Naval supremacy was, in fact, vital to the country's prosperity, if not to its survival, since Britain, as has been observed, 'could not feed herself and her industry could not function without regular shipments of raw materials from abroad'. In the late 1850s Britain's dependence on overseas trade was such that over 90 per cent of its imports were raw materials and foodstuffs, while 85 per cent of its exports were finished goods. By 1880, Britain's sea borne trade was valued at over £ 700 million a year – three times that of France and ten times that of Russia. A prime concern of British policy was therefore to maintain an uninterrupted flow of trade by ensuring the safety of the sea-lanes throughout the world."

Similarly, the German commercial threat is described by Lowe as follows (pp. 5-6):

"In 1865 Britain was at the peak of its industrial and commercial supremacy in the world, while its overseas investment probably exceeded those of all other countries combined. The country was the world's banker as well as the world's greatest trading nation whose merchant fleet dominated the oceans throughout the globe. By 1900 Britain had added even more territory to its existing empire, which made it the greatest imperial power in the world. Well before 1900, however, Britain's ascendancy was being challenged by its European rivals, especially Germany and France, as well as by the United States, so that British trade and industry suffered a relative decline. Britain's share of world trade dropped from about 23 per cent in 1880 to 14 per cent in 1912, while its share of world industrial production fell from 23.2 per cent in 1880 to 13.6 per cent by 1913 – by which time Germany's share had risen to 15 per cent and that of the USA to a startling 32 per cent. In terms of the annual increase in industrial production from 1885 to 1913, Britain's rate of growth was a mere 2.1 per cent – less than half that of Germany, let alone the USA (5.2 per cent) and Russia (5.7 per cent).

The sense of being overtaken in the industrial race, aggravated by clinging to the principle of free trade in an increasingly protectionist world, explains some of the stridency that coloured Britain's overseas policy in the late nineteenth century. ... Defending commercial interests across the globe placed a heavy strain on Britain's limited resources."

air. If one ball falls, the juggler can continue to keep the others aloft and even bend down to retrieve the errant one.

Yet complexity was also the system's weakness. When Bismarck was succeeded by leaders less adroit, the alliance system could not be maintained. Rather than channeling conflict away from Germany, as Bismarck did by encouraging France to expend its energies on colonial ventures in Africa, German leaders in the years leading up to 1914 allowed alliances to lapse and tension to grow. Instead of renewing the German entente with Russia, the Kaiser let Russia float into an alliance with the British. What was once a fluid, multipolar alliance system gradually evolved into two alliance blocs, with dangerous consequences for European peace.²⁴

Another historian, Donald Kagan, offers a slightly different analysis as to how Britain regarded the German threat to its interests:

Of these continuing [British] interests the most basic were three: control of the seas, especially those around the British Isles; control of the Low Countries and their ports on the English Channel; and the prevention of control of Europe by a single power. At the turn of the century, there was no chance that France or Russia would threaten any of these interests. No one yet foresaw any threat to the latter two, but Germany was emerging as a menace to the most basic interest of all: control of the seas.²⁵

The German decision, part of *Weltpolitik* (a conscious rejection of Bismarck's cautious post-1870 policies), to challenge British naval supremacy therefore directly threatened British interests in its overseas empire and international trade. The German armaments drive, its economic expansion, and its chauvinistic ambition (for instance, its newfound interest in African colonies, something always foresworn by Bismarck), pressured Britain into seeking allies to blunt German ambitions:

²⁴ Nye pp. 58-9

²⁵ Kagan. p. 144.

At the structural level, there were two key elements: the rise of German power and the increased rigidity in the alliance systems. The rise of German power was truly impressive. German heavy industry surpassed that of Great Britain in the 1890's, and the growth of German GNP at the beginning of the century was twice that of Great Britain's. In the 1860's, Britain had one quarter of the world's industrial production, but by 1913, that had shrunk to 10 percent, and Germany's share had risen to 15 percent. Germany transformed some of its industrial strength into military capability, including a massive naval armaments program. As a result of the increase in Germany's power, Britain began to fear becoming isolated. Britain began to worry about how it would defend its far-flung empire. ...

Britain's response to Germany's rising power contributed to the second structural problem of the war: the increasing rigidity in the alliance systems in Europe. In 1904, parting from its geographically semi-isolated position as a balancer off the coast of Europe, Britain moved toward an alliance with France. In 1907, the Anglo-French partnership broadened to include Russia and became known as the Triple Entente. Germany, seeing itself encircled, tightened its relations with Austria-Hungary. As the alliances became more rigid, diplomatic flexibility was lost. No more were the shifting alignments that characterized the balance of power during Bismarck's day. Instead, the major powers wrapped themselves around two poles.²⁶

The end result of the European power system's inability to accommodate growing German power was the First World War. What were the specific *immediate* reasons for the war? Nye cites two "domestic" causes for the war: the internal crises of declining empires (Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman) and the domestic situation and the rise of pernicious nationalism in Germany. These factors, set against the backdrop of "mediocre" leadership in European capitals and the polarization and increasing inflexibility of the continental alliance system in the years immediately before the war, all combined to make for a very dangerous international setting.²⁷

²⁶ Nye. Pp. 60-61.

²⁷ Nye. p 57. Niall Ferguson's 2000 revisionist work, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*, is a notable exception to the consensus view of German responsibility for World War I. See Ferguson, Niall. *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*. Basic Books. New York. 2000.

LESSONS FROM THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

The situation that led to World War I and the contemporary *global* strategic situation have both similarity and contrasts. Both eras witnessed the collapse of empires: the First World War witnessed the break-up of both the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian empires; our age has seen the downfall of the Soviet Union. The implications of the Soviet collapse – followed by ongoing Russian weakness, corruption, and decline (Russia as the contemporary version of the “Eastern Question?”) – are yet to be fully understood and the impact of the new independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus and the freedom of the former states of the Warsaw Pact states of eastern and central Europe has yet to be fully realized. By default, Russia has been *removed from the Asia calculus*, as it casts its attention inward, and westward.

Similarly, both eras have experienced a shift in the paradigm governing the equilibrium of the international system. In the case of nineteenth century Europe, there was a change from a flexible, multipolar balance of power to a rigid bipolar alliance system that led to the catastrophe of the Great War. This process began with the defeat of France in 1870 and its replacement by Germany as the most powerful state on the continent. We are now in the process, as suggested by Henry Kissinger, of moving from the stability of the bipolarity of the Cold War to a new international system, about whose full outlines we can only speculate. This shift to new global equilibrium, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, is – as suggested by the European experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – particularly dangerous, as the United States and other international players, in a Hobbesian struggle of all against all, attempt to define the new international system and their respective roles in it. This new international equilibrium will be reflected, if not in a new global system, in new regional

systems, especially in Asia, where there seems to be the greatest chance for conflict (see discussion on pp. 6-7, above.)

Moreover, in the absence of the bipolar nuclear stalemate and its restraining influence on proxy and client states, there is a danger that the U.S. reliance on the military instrument may grow, particularly during the turbulence of this move to a new international system (i.e., away from the current degree of American preeminence). American tendencies towards unilateralism (“we are doing it because we can”), the fundamentally anarchic international system, and the transformation of the American military, including the increasing use and effectiveness of precision weaponry (which combines to increase combat effectiveness and lethality while offering the *apparent* opportunity for conducting military operations with limited risk of casualties) increase these dangers. Just as was the case with European attitudes in August 1914, the United States could stumble into a mindset that it *must* resort to the military instrument – and that by not choosing a military response, the United States will lose the deterrent effect of maintaining an effective fighting force. The idea that by not using the military instrument when it is available is a sign of weakness or defeat would be inherently dangerous and inimical to long-term U.S. interests.

As was the case with nineteenth century Germany, we are watching the impressive economic expansion of a new industrial/trading power in China. Like Germany, China presumably will have the opportunity and choice of transforming its exploding economic and industrial strength into military capabilities. Chinese decision-making in this regard will need to be watched closely – and given the opaqueness of Chinese government policy and budget making, this will be by no means an easy task. U.S. reaction to Chinese economic success (and its impact on Chinese military expenditures) must be informed by a clear understanding and

analysis of choices made by Beijing. While China has an important role in allaying fears about its intentions, U.S. policy makers (like their turn-of-the-century British counterparts) must demonstrate the ability to correctly discern and react to decisions made by a rising power.

In the case of Wilhelmine Germany, second-rate leaders who fed, and fed on, malignant German nationalism led the state. China's current leadership has increasingly relied on Chinese nationalism as a source of legitimacy. While it is by no means clear that China will pursue an aggressive policy aimed at confrontation with its neighbors and/or the United States (indeed, a credible case can be made that Chinese foreign policy in recent years has been cautious and measured in its dealings with other great powers, notably the United States), the lack of internal transparency in Chinese government and party elites raises questions about Chinese intentions.

In the case of pre-World War I Europe, there were players, so-called “flank” powers positioned on the margins of the international system’s balance of power. The United States played such a role (as did Japan). The United States had an economic expansion at the turn of the century that far outstripped even Germany. Ultimately, during the war, the United States served as a benevolent, like-minded safety net for Britain and France, intervening on their behalf and helping to turn the tide on the battlefield. While no player of the potential power (relatively speaking) of the early twentieth century United States currently exists, Europe and, to a lesser extent (since it already plays an important role in the U.S.-China relationship), Japan are potential like-minded, benevolent powers outside of a possible U.S.-China rivalry.

Unlike nineteenth century Europe, territorial expansion no longer considered important for national power. In this regard, some may argue that Taiwan is a bit of an anomaly since; many, including the Chinese would disagree with such a comparison, citing Beijing’s long-standing claims of sovereignty over the island. Nonetheless, Taiwan is anomalous insofar as it serves as a

geographic/territorial concern for a great power – and a concern/interest that could provoke a great power war. (However, China’s views of Taiwan may have some parallels in the Prussian desire for German unification.) Conversely, competition for international markets can only be expected to intensify in the years to come.

In the conclusion of *Politics Among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau suggests four fundamental rules to guide nations. Although first written at the height of the Cold War, they continue to serve as useful guideposts for contemporary policy-makers and track with some of the lessons that can be drawn from the fin de siècle European experience:²⁸:

- Diplomacy must be divested of the “Crusading Spirit.”
- The objectives of foreign policy must be defined in terms of the national interest and must be supported with adequate power.
- Diplomacy must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations.
- Nations must be willing to compromise on all issues that are not vital to them. There are five prerequisite for compromise: give up the shadow of worthless rights for the substance of real advantage; never put yourself in a position from which you cannot retreat without losing face and from which you cannot advance without grave risks; never allow an ally to make decisions for you; the armed forces are the instrument of foreign policy, not its master; and the government is the leader of public opinion, not its slave.

²⁸ These can be found at: Morgenthau. Pp. 555-558. Needless to say, Morgenthau regarded these are useful principles for all states, not just the United States. They would serve Chinese interests as well.

There are several general rules of thumb that the United States and other international actors may wish to consider for future action regarding the rise of a new great power – China – that are suggested by the experience of nineteenth century Europe. The following are among those that come to mind.

- **Retain flexibility.** The European balance of power worked well throughout most of the nineteenth century. Britain served as the offshore “balancing power” for much of the century, carefully weighing the continental power equation and supporting the weaker side in order to prevent any one state from becoming a hegemon. Once Germany’s ambitions and maladroit diplomacy (post-Bismarck) had made such balancing impossible, the players in the balancing system quickly locked themselves into a rigid alliance system with an internal logic that triggered a downward spiral to war. (Diplomacy must look at the political scene from the point of view of others and compromise on non-vital interests is necessary, according to Morgenthau.)
- **People matter.** There is a need for statesmen and leadership on *all* sides. Wisdom is always a quality in short supply. . . “The responsibility of statesmen . . . is to resolve complexity rather than to contemplate it.”²⁹ We can only hope that, like Bismarck or the diplomatists of the Concert of Europe, states will exercise moderation and establish clear limits in pursuing national goals and to limit their ambitions. Like Clausewitz’

²⁹ Kissinger. *Diplomacy*. p. 113.

requirement for genius in the commander in war,³⁰ there is a similar need for genius in statesmanship and strategy.

- **Complacency (about peace) must be avoided.** Nothing is permanent and nothing should be taken for granted. Conflicts/crises are inevitable – the dynamic, anarchic international system must be managed. There is a need to see world realistically in win/win terms, not as a zero sum game. War between the great powers – which last occurred six decades ago – can happen again and the stakes, in a nuclear age, are much higher.
- **Thread the needle.** Notwithstanding the 1990s economic boom, the United States (and other great powers) must heed Paul Kennedy's advice and avoid overstretch; i.e., placing the nation's economic base at risk in the pursuit of military goals and the build-up and maintenance of the military instrument.³¹ Kennedy argues, "... in a long-drawn-out Great Power (and usually coalition) war, victory has repeatedly gone to the side with the more flourishing productive base."³² At the same time, however, the United States should discourage the potential for an arms race and the rise of a potential military competitor by maintaining its current overwhelming military superiority and alliance system in Asia. (Arms races – while not necessarily destabilizing per se, can reinforce other signals about a potential rival's intentions and ambitions.) This is admittedly a budgetary and diplomatic balancing act – one however that will only grow more difficult with the passage of time and economic gains by other states relative to the United States.

³⁰ Von Clausewitz, Carl. *On War*. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey. 1989. p. 100.

³¹ Kennedy, p. 539.

³² Kennedy, p. xxiv.

(As Morgenthau argues, the United States must define its national interest and support it with adequate resources.) Winning a costly war, as France and Britain learned in World War I, may not be worth the price to be paid.

- **Nationalism needs to be kept in check.** World War I and subsequent twentieth century conflicts serve as object lessons about what can happen when leaders pander to nationalistic instincts. China's leadership should be careful in this regard; so should the United States. Divest diplomacy of the “Crusading Spirit,” in Morgenthau's phrase. (One author cautions, that “As China becomes less communist, it is probably becoming more dangerous.”³³)

- **Direct conflict must be avoided between great powers.** Particularly with the end of the Cold War, war between the United States and a peer competitor would be difficult to limit (such as the 1950s experience in Korea). The First World War demonstrated the unpredictability and catastrophic nature of war between great powers. The next such war could involve a nuclear exchange. There is no assurance that the long-term interest of the United States would be assured by victory in such a conflict. The United States may not have a choice other than war to defend its vital interests; in order to avoid a conflict that would not serve its interests, the United States should therefore shape the international environment – and its own national policies – while it has relatively more influence, power, and wealth – well in advance of any potential conflict. Paul Kennedy argues that “The present large Powers in the international system are thus compelled to grapple with the twin challenges which have confronted all of their predecessors: first, with the uneven pattern of economic growth, which causes some of them to become wealthier

³³ Ott, Marvin. “East Asia: Security and Complexity.” *Current History*. April 2001. p. 151.

(and, usually, stronger) relative to others; and second, with the competitive and occasionally dangerous scene abroad, which forces them to choose between a more immediate military security and a longer-term economic security.”³⁴

- **Do not allow smaller allies to make decisions for you.** Wilhemine Germany permitted Austria-Hungary to make decisions that drew Germany into a wider war that triggered the activation of the bipolar alliance system then in place. (Britain and France responded in kind once Germany had declared war on Russia.) The United States must guard against Taiwan from playing a similar role in the Sino-American relationship.

CONCLUSIONS

John Ikenberry reminds us that:

America’s unipolar moment need not end in antagonistic disarray. But the United States needs to rediscover the solutions that it has brought to the problem of unequal power in the past. These solutions are celebrated in our national political tradition. The rule of law, constitutional principles and inclusive institutions of political participation ensure that governance is not simply a product of wealth or power. The wealthy and the powerful must operate within principled institutional parameters. Because a rule-based order generates more stable and cooperative relations within the country, even the wealthy and powerful gain by avoiding social upheaval, which puts everyone’s interests at risk. America can once again take this old domestic insight and use it to shape post-Cold War international relations. And it is time to do so now, when America’s relative power may be at its peak.³⁵

In other words, confrontation between great powers, more specifically between the United States and China, as Henry Kissinger reminds us, is not inevitable. A diplomatic accommodation is

³⁴ Kennedy p. 540.

³⁵ Ikenberry p. 24

possible – as the European powers demonstrated after the defeat of Napoleon. In the case of the Concert of Europe, Henry Kissinger points out that “compatibility between domestic institutions is a reinforcement for peace.”³⁶ Partnership, not rivalry, *is* an alternative:

The United States therefore finds itself increasingly in a world with numerous similarities to nineteenth century Europe, albeit on a global scale. One can hope that something akin to the Metternich system evolves, in which a balance of power is reinforced by a shared sense of values. And in the modern age, these values would have to be democratic.³⁷

This conclusion would necessarily presume that China will continue along the path of economic and political liberalization. Ultimately such developments in China will depend upon the Chinese themselves – and there is relatively little that outside parties can do, beyond diplomatic engagement, to bring about a more transparent, democratic Chinese society that upholds the rule of law and respects human rights. Such developments within China would ease bilateral friction and greatly reduce the chance for mutual antagonism.

In the interim, the United States needs to do what it can to “preserve the unipolar moment” – a conscious policy aimed at *hedging* its bets – while shaping the environment for the inevitable shift in the international system. For now, American international primacy does matter – even in the face of an inevitable relative decline. As Samuel Huntington points out, no country besides the United States can “make comparable contributions to international order and stability” and the Soviet collapse leaves the United States as “the only major power whose national identity is defined by a set of universal political and economic values.” Huntington rightly concludes that:

³⁶ Kissinger. *Diplomacy*. p. 79

³⁷ Ibid. 166.

A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any country shaping global affairs. The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, open economies, and international order in the world.³⁸

However, American primacy is temporary, and U.S. policies need to be based on the realization of American limitations and that, “The road to empire leads to domestic decay....”³⁹

In East Asia, the United States must maintain forward-based forces and strong alliances in the region – with a particular focus on Japan, which needs to get its domestic economic house in order and restore relationships with the rest of Asia, especially Korea. In the words of one former U.S. government official, “the design of a new framework for U.S., Japanese, and South Korean cooperation” needs to be found.⁴⁰ Much work has been done on this in recent years; it needs to continue, with an eye toward eventual re-unification of the Korean peninsula. At that point, the goal of U.S. policy should be to retain its security relationship Korea, albeit on a different level (absent the threat from the North) – with an absolute goal of keeping a unified Korea out of the Chinese orbit, a danger posed by geography and the close proximity of China’s overwhelming size and power. A Korea, driven by a perceived need to accommodate itself to a potential regional hegemon, aligning itself with China, poses the risk of the eventual development of a bipolar regional system (perhaps even a rigid alliance system, keeping in mind the European experience) that would be inimical to U.S. interests.

³⁸ Huntington, Samuel P. “Why International Primacy Matters.” *International Security*. Volume 17, Issue 4 (Spring 1993). p. 83

³⁹ Kissinger, Henry. *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* p. 287.

⁴⁰ Campbell, Kurt M. The Cusp of Strategic Change in Asia. *Orbis*. Volume 45, Issue 3. (Summer 2001). p. 378.

The American relationships with India, Russia and Europe will also be key underpinnings of managing our relationship with an emergent China. India, like China, could be on the verge of great power status, and Sino-Indian relations have often been strained. A democracy, India stands as a natural U.S. ally in managing a rising China. Similarly, Russia historically has been an Asian power, and instability or weakness in Moscow impacts U.S. interests in Asia. U.S. policy makers need to keep the Asian dimension in mind in their management of Russo-U.S. relations. Current Russian weakness does not preclude a resumption of a Russian role in Asia. However, Russian arms sales to Asian customers (notably China and India) remain a concern and need to be addressed. As Zbigniew Brzezinski argues, in considering Eurasia, “Europe is America’s essential geopolitical bridgehead.” Europe, though distant from Asia, could play the role of the likeminded, benevolent flanking power (again drawing parallels from the nineteenth century European experience).

Finally, the United States must heed Morgenthau’s warning about great powers allowing smaller allies to make decisions on their behalf and avoid the mistakes made by Europe in stumbling into the First World War. This is of particular concern with Taiwan, its active lobby in Washington and is a particularly difficult challenge, given the deliberately ambiguous American policy regarding Taiwan, dating from the three Sino-U.S. communiqués. American policymakers must be nonetheless certain that U.S. redlines are clearly understood by Taipei. The Republic of China (Taiwan) must understand that a great power war between the United States and China would not serve either American or Chinese interests – and it would not serve Taiwanese interests, either.

In considering U.S. management of China’s emergence as a great power, the key will be the quality of American – and Chinese – statesmanship. Consistency, tenacity, and, above all,

wisdom will be required. “The ultimate dilemma of the statesman is to strike a balance between values and interest and occasionally, between peace and justice.⁴¹” The victory of Cold War came as result of 45-year effort. Success in addressing the challenges of the next international system – and the transition to it – will take a similarly long-term, sustained effort. “For both countries, the twenty-first century will undoubtedly test, for the first time in modern history, whether the rise of a major power can be peaceful and relatively low-cost, for both China and the rest of the world.”⁴²

⁴¹ Kissinger. *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* P. 286.

⁴² Bin Yu. “China and Its Asian Neighbors: Implications for Sino-U.S. Relations.” in *In the Eyes of the Dragon*. Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang (ed.). Rowman and Littlefield. Boulder, Colorado. 1999. p. 202.

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